Life on the boulder’s edge

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Fingers covered with chalk, Gary R. Parker, who works in the Explosive Applications and Special Projects group at the Laboratory, eases his right arm upward, his eyes surveying every feature of the boulder from which he hangs. Strong fingers find a miniscule hold on an otherwise smooth rock. Anchoring his left hand into another hold, Parker then uses his strategically placed legs to press upward, moving dynamically up the imposing boulder.

“I grew up on the East Coast,” he explains, “and we used to go to this place called Seneca Rocks in West Virginia. One afternoon we’d just finished a hike, and while standing in the parking lot I saw these guys getting ready for a rock climb. And I thought, ‘man, this looks like such an amazing activity to try out.’ It wasn’t until I came to New Mexico to study at New Mexico State University, though, that I actually started to learn how to rock climb. There were plenty of climbers at the university, and they took me out and taught me the basics of the sport.”

The sport of bouldering

To train for more difficult climbs, rock climbers practice what is known as bouldering. Bouldering consists of short climbs on boulders typically no taller than 20 feet, enabling climbers to practice specific movements, build stamina and increase the strength of their fingers and toes.

“While at the university, I’d been spending lots of weekends camping and climbing in the Las Cruces area when I clued in that just down the road outside El Paso was a park known as Hueco Tanks State Park, a world-renowned place for bouldering,” Parker says. “I went there and tried out the sport, and that’s when I became hooked on this particular niche of the climbing community.”

Unlike traditional rock climbing, bouldering is performed without using ropes or harnesses. Instead, climbers use bouldering pads to prevent injuries from falls. Parker notes that spotters are also used to keep climbers from crashing down dozens of feet. The emphasis on this kind of climbing is solving what are called boulder problems, a sequence of sometimes intricate moves it takes a climber to successfully ascend a boulder’s length. Some of the more complicated bouldering moves have a climber moving *horizontally* across steeply overhanging rock faces.

“Regardless of what type of climbing you’re into, climbers will tell you that there’s always what is called the crux of a climb,” says Gary. “The crux is what will make or break your attempt in a particular climb. What bouldering really does is distill climbing down to the

crux. With these smaller boulders, the emphasis is on difficulty, and that's the essence of the challenge."

Giving back to the climbing community

In addition to bouldering, Parker is a keen photographer and videographer. To expand areas where climbers can practice this sport, he has combined his interests in photography, videography and climbing to track and develop new climbing areas in New Mexico and beyond.

"There's one place we've found that's just made for climbing," he says. "We call it 'The Ortegas,' namely the mountains of Ortega East and Ortega West in the southern part of the Carson National Forest, a little over an hour's drive from Los Alamos. On the flanks of these mountains are hundreds of high-quality boulders that are ideal for the sport."

Although Parker makes no claim to discovering this new climbing area, he does note that it's a Los Alamos group that's been instrumental in getting the word out about this area.

"This group has done the hard work," Gary says, "hiking the trails, mapping the area, and documenting the site. I would say the Los Alamos climbers have served as the primary driving force for turning this area into a place where climbers from outside northern New Mexico can visit, climb and experience the rewards of establishing a new destination for climbing."